



NEWS RELEASE

Southwest Area

For up-to-date fire information visit: <http://gacc.nifc.gov/swcc/>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A Break in the Fire Weather—Make the Most of It!

Phoenix, ARIZ---March 20, 2006--- Predictive service experts and other wildfire analysts put out the warning early this spring, that “an abundance of herbaceous fine fuels remain across much of the Southwest from the wet winter of 2004-2005. The significant lack of precipitation since the fall of 2005 has led to extremely low mountain snow pack and very bad fuel conditions. An early start to the fire season with a high likelihood of early season timber fires is expected as a result of these factors.”

So now we have had some much needed moisture across Arizona. Has this changed the outlook for this year’s fire season? Not completely!! Just look next door at Texas and Oklahoma where rain has been followed by strong warm and dry winds which continue to lead to devastating wildfires causing death and destruction across both states.

Even though these last storms brought substantial amounts of rain and snow to most of Arizona, fire season will still occur, only now a little later and this is the perfect time to look around your home or recreation property and think Firewise. After the snow begins to disappear and the ground starts to dry out, you can safely begin projects around your home and property. If you are even remotely near an area that could experience a wildfire, use this time to insure your home and property or summer residence is as defensible against wildfire as possible.

If this year’s fire season holds true as predicted, firefighters will not be getting much rest. And, when they are fighting fire, they are not about to risk their lives or the lives of their crew members to save a home with no defensible space. Creating defensible space is your responsibility, when firefighters arrive on the scene; it is too late to start.

Take a close look at the vegetation around the buildings on your property. Have you removed portions of trees and bushes that extend within 10 feet of your flue openings, 15 feet would be even better? Do your flue and chimney tops have a screen-covering made of mesh with openings no larger than ¼ inch? Are the roof areas and gutters clear of pine needles, dry leaves, and branches? Prune tree limbs to a height of 15 feet and thin all vegetation on your property to prevent ground fires from spreading upward into the tops of brush and trees. A minimum recommendation is to thin trees so there is at least 20 feet between tree crowns.

Do you live near an area with heavy desert fuel loading, a result of last year’s wet winter and spring? If you do, you may be dealing with amounts of vegetation you have never experienced. Keep all grass and weeds cut below eight inches in vacant lots and keep lawns mowed and shrubs pruned.

The amount of vegetation you may need to cut, thin, or completely clear is dependent upon many factors. Look at the vegetation growing on your property, your neighbor’s property, and beyond. How thick and tall is it, what kind of a slope leads up to your dwelling and other buildings? Most experts agree; if your home or cabin is located within a pine or other dense forest, you may be looking at a safety zone of at least 125 feet. And, if your home sits on a steep slope near the desert or lower elevations with this year’s continued heavy fuel

buildups, none of the standard protective measures may suffice. If you are unsure about your situation, contact your local fire department or land management agency office near where you live

Whether you own a cabin, recreation residence, a vacant lot, or live in a subdivision bordering wild lands, you should consider the following in addition to items previously mentioned:

- ✓ Stack firewood, lumber, or other combustible materials at least 30- and preferably 100 feet away and uphill from structures
- ✓ Inspect your chimney at least twice a year, clean it at least once a year
- ✓ Store gasoline, oil rags, and other flammables in approved safety cans
- ✓ Install and learn to use fire extinguishers
- ✓ Clear a 10-foot area around propane tanks and barbecues
- ✓ Mow grass, cut weeds and brush frequently
- ✓ Keep vacant lots cleared of all flammable vegetation
- ✓ Follow all local burning/open fire regulations
- ✓ Have garden hoses long enough to reach any area of your home/buildings, and finally
- ✓ Keep shovels, rakes, buckets, close at hand in case of fire.

And yes, last year in Arizona, abundant winter and spring rains did in fact provide ideal growing conditions for grasses, forbs, and other light fuels, reaching record levels in some areas at the lower elevations. The heavy areas of concentration of flashy desert fuels proved to be extremely volatile. Flames spread rapidly scorching large amounts of acreage in a very short period as seen during the Cave Creek Complex and other fires last year.

Late springs rains in 2006 may increase the low elevation fuel loads to an even more dangerous level. The overall fire threat could be higher this year due to the fact that across the higher elevations of Arizona there has been an almost complete lack of winter moisture from rain and snow until March. When the heavier fuels dry out, the forested areas could see substantial fire activity. Remember the February Fire burned aggressively down the Mogollon Rim as if it was the June Fire and conditions will undoubtedly return to that level.

For further information on defensible space, Firewise, and other information, visit websites www.firewise.org, <http://gacc.nifc.gov/swcc/>, www.azfireinfo.com, or call toll free 1-877-864-6985

NOTE: *March 26-April 1 is Wildfire Awareness Week with a proclamation scheduled to be signed by Governor Napolitano on March 21 in Prescott at the 4th Annual Forest Health Summit.*